



The Intrinsic Connection Between Zen Aesthetics and Modernist Painting: An Exploration from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract. This paper adopts the perspective of cross-cultural comparative study, primarily conducting a formal analysis and comparison—that is, comparing the resonance and similarities between Zen aesthetic principles and modernist paintings in terms of formal language, creative process, and aesthetic effects. Focusing on the Zen aesthetic principles of 'simplicity,' 'ethereality,' and 'sudden enlightenment,' the analysis explores how these concepts resonated with the linguistic innovations of modernist painting through their embodiment in formal simplification, the interplay of void and substance, and intuitive creation. By examining 'dematerialization' and active viewer participation, this study explores how Zen aesthetics provided modernist art with pathways to transcend dualistic oppositions and return to humanistic liberation. It reveals a shared impetus in both traditions towards shifting art from material representation to spiritual exploration, thereby uncovering a commonality in artistic spirit between Eastern and Western civilizations.

Keywords: Zen Aesthetics, Modernism, Cross-Cultural, Spirituality.

1 Introduction

At the dawn of the 20th century, as Western modernist artists sought breakthroughs from the constraints of traditional art, Eastern Zen aesthetics, with its unique visual language, infused this revolution with philosophical depth and formal inspiration. Centered on the principles of simplicity, ethereality, and intuition, Zen aesthetics represents both a distillation of the material world and an inquiry into spiritual freedom. Its visual expression transforms philosophical contemplation into artistic language through minimalist forms, metaphors embedded in negative space, and the capture of the intuitive moment. The cross-cultural dissemination of this aesthetic philosophy enriched the creative logic of modern art, forging a bridge for spiritual dialogue between Eastern and Western civilizations.

2 The Visual Language Schema of Zen Aesthetics

As a fusion of Eastern philosophy and artistic practice, Zen aesthetics manifests its visual expression within the deep structures of specific art forms, creative thinking, and aesthetic experience. Unlike the Western artistic tradition, which emphasizes representation and rational analysis, the core of Zen art lies in 'directly pointing to the mind', expressing the most profound spiritual essence through the most concise forms. This aesthetic concept is pursued in painting as 'simplicity,' 'ethereality,' and 'sudden enlightenment,' which together constitute the unique schema of Zen visual language.

2.1 Simplicity: The Formal Logic of 'Less Is More'

'Less is more' serves as the formal logic of Zen aesthetics, embodying a condensed summation of the material world and a philosophical inquiry into spiritual essence. The foundation of this concept can be traced back to the Zen thought of 'breaking attachments' (pozhi) – advocating the stripping away of superficial redundancy to directly point to the essence of things. In art, this manifests as the extreme simplification of form, conveying the deepest meaning with the fewest visual elements. "Six Persimmons" by the Southern Song dynasty Zen monk Muqi is a paradigm of this logic: the painting features only six persimmons rendered in varying shades of ink, set against an almost entirely blank background. The forms of the persimmons are simplified into patches of ink through rough brushstrokes resembling 'crushed sugarcane residue.' Muqi did not pursue realistic details but used minimal symbols to condense the Zen philosophy of 'emptiness' (kong). As D.T. Suzuki noted, Zen art uses the fewest symbols to convey the deepest truths.[1] Its appeal seems to say: 'Look at nature! The tree of life is evergreen! Do not disturb or destroy it!'[2]

2.2 Ethereality: The Spatial Philosophy of 'Void and Substance Interdependent'

The connotation of 'emptiness' (kong) is not physical nothingness, but an embrace of infinite possibility and an intuitive apprehension of essence, rooted in the Buddhist concept of 'dependent origination and emptiness' (yuanqi xingkong). This evolved into a visual language and perceptible aesthetic experience through negative space, simplification, and spatial reconstruction. The Southern Song painter Yujian's 'Mount Lu' uses splashed-ink mountains and misty blank areas to construct the artistic conception of 'hazy mountain colors.' A few brushstrokes outline the mountain peaks, while the rest is implied through blank space suggesting flowing mist and clouds, resonating with the Zen philosophy of 'formless form'. Tang Hou of the Yuan dynasty commented in *Hua Jian*: 'using emptiness as substance, using nothingness as existence,' revealing the metaphorical function of negative space for infinite time and space. Similarly, in 'Lone Bird on a Withered Branch' by Bada Shanren of the Qing dynasty, a solitary bird perches on a dead branch against a background over 80% blank. The bird's eye, rendered with an 'upward-turned gaze of contempt,' metaphorically expresses detachment from the mundane world. As the German philosopher Martin Heidegger stated: 'Truth

establishes itself in the work'.[3] "Emptiness" is precisely where truth resides. It signifies the purest essence within the universe—innate within us, requiring no search. Unafraid of defilement, when Buddha-nature is perfected, one attains the state of "Fundamentally, not a single thing exists"—the realm of Emptiness.[4]

2.3 Sudden Enlightenment: The Creative Methodology of Non-Rational Thinking

In Zen aesthetics, 'sudden enlightenment' (dunwu) is like a flash of insight, occurring when one completely relinquishes attachment to technique and rules, allowing innate creativity to burst forth spontaneously. In artistic creation, the painter stops obsessing over 'how to paint realistically' and instead lets emotions and inspiration flow freely in the moment. As Yan Yu stated in Canglang's Remarks on Poetry *Canglang Shihua*: 'Generally, the Way of Zen lies solely in wondrous enlightenment, and the Way of Poetry also lies in wondrous enlightenment... Poetry possesses a unique talent, unrelated to book learning; poetry possesses a unique delight, unrelated to reason.'[5] This challenges the conventional logic that 'effort yields results,' emphasizing that true creation is born in moments of mental relaxation and freedom. In the encounter between Eastern and Western art, this view of creation subtly influenced the trajectory of modern art. Abstract Expressionist painter Willem de Kooning would work continuously for dozens of hours, repeatedly scraping and applying paint until rationality was exhausted and instinct took over the brush. The Chinese painter Shitao wrote in Remarks on Painting *Hua Yulu*: 'The method of the single stroke is established by myself,' emphasizing that each painting is a unique experience of the present moment. Though separated by three centuries, both attest that true creation begins with letting go of preconceptions and allowing body and mind to become channels for intuition.

3 Formal Innovations in Modernist Painting and Zen Inspiration

The World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 marked the formal entry of Zen Buddhism into American society. Japanese Zen master Soyen Shaku was invited to attend this event, accompanied by his disciple D.T. Suzuki who served as interpreter. Suzuki would become the most influential Zen scholar and teacher in America and the West during the first half of the twentieth century. A cohort of perceptive modernist artists turned their gaze eastward. They discovered that the aesthetics of "simplicity," "ethereality," and "enlightenment" in Zen art resonated profoundly with their own artistic pursuit of transcending material appearances to grasp essential truths. This cultural encounter was no coincidence: Impressionist painters had already drawn inspiration from the flatness of ukiyo-e; meanwhile, early 20th-century avant-garde artists delved deeper into the spiritual core of Zen aesthetics, quietly achieving a paradigm shift—from "reproducing what the eye sees" to "manifesting what the mind apprehends"—through formal innovation.

3.1 Formal Simplification: From Stripping Decoration to Returning to Essence

Cubist Deconstruction and the Zen Concept of 'Breaking Attachments' (Pozhi).

Cubism's fragmentation and reassembly of objects parallels Zen's 'axe of breaking attachments.' Yet Picasso's rebellion was never destruction for its own sake; its essence was an interrogation of art's nature. Zen's pozhi aims to dissolve discriminating mind, while Cubism's dismantling of perspective similarly negated a singular view of truth. His Cubist masterpiece *Les Femmes d'Alger* subverted Renaissance perspective and anatomical structure, deconstructing the human figure into geometric planes, using fractured space and displaced viewpoints to challenge the viewer's ingrained notions of 'reality.' Through geometric forms and dynamic perspectives, modernist painters pursued a reality more profound and essential than the visible world—the enduring Reality they sought.[6] This departure from traditional realism forms a subtle philosophical echo with Zen's effort to shatter attachment to appearances and concepts. Picasso's geometric language captures the essence of the material world intuitively; his rebelliousness was fundamentally an exploration of spiritual freedom. This freedom entails both the liberation of form and the reconstruction of the viewer's perception; Cubism forces the viewer to see anew through fragmented form.

Geometric Abstraction and the Zen Cosmology of 'One is All, All is One'. Piet Mondrian's geometric abstract paintings, characterized by strict straight lines, right angles, and grids composed of primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and non-colors (black, white), present a highly ordered visual system. His method of rejecting natural imagery and returning to basic elements shares a profound philosophical connection with the Zen cosmology that 'One is All, All is One'. [7] Therefore, Mondrian's geometric abstraction is not merely a formal mapping of urban rhythms; its deeper significance lies in constructing a spiritual spatial model, through pure and simplified visual language, that resonates with the cosmic unity and intrinsic interconnectedness elucidated by Zen.

3.2 The Ethereal Realm: The Philosophical Dimension of Abstract Art

The revolutionary nature of abstract art lies in its abandonment of depicting the representational world, instead creating an 'empty field' for the soul to dwell. When Mondrian simplified trees into intersecting vertical and horizontal lines, when Mark Rothko made color fields float on the canvas, they were actually practicing the ancient Zen wisdom that 'emptiness contains all realms', using the purest forms to make space for the viewer's imagination and contemplation.

The Meditative Spirit of Color Field Painting. Rothko's large-scale color field paintings are a form of silent visual meditation. His 'Orange and Yellow' features orange and yellow rectangles suspended against a deep red background; the blurred edges of the color blocks resemble mist, throwing the viewer into a timeless meditative field. His extreme simplification of color, form, and space dissolves the narrative and representational functions of traditional painting, forcing the viewer to confront

the emotional tension of color itself and its spatial relationships. Rothko refused to title his works with specific objects, stating he was only interested in expressing basic human emotions. In *White Center (Rose, Red on Wine)*, a white rectangle is sandwiched between red, yellow, and black, its edges dissolving like morning light, negating formal certainty. This 'soft edge' treatment subtly parallels the Southern Song Zen painting tradition of using blank space to construct artistic conception, transforming 'emptiness' into the breathing space between colors. He explicitly stated: 'Silence is so accurate!'[8] This meditative quality makes Rothko one of the practitioners in modern art closest to the Zen spirit. He demonstrated with minimalist forms that art's power lies not only in narrative or symbolism but also in awakening the viewer's inner 'awareness of emptiness' (kongxing juezhi).

Transcending Realistic Space and Inner Harmony. Salvador Dalí declared Surrealism destructive, but only of the shackles binding our perception. His paintings construct a visual universe challenging physical laws with distorted spatiotemporal logic. His masterpiece *The Persistence of Memory* depicts melting clocks draped over a dead tree and barren landscape, with ants crawling on the dials against a void background. This subversion of realistic space engages in a subtle dialogue with the Zen philosophy of 'form and emptiness are non-dual' (se kong bu er) – only when the certainty of the material world is dissolved can the harmony of the inner spirit manifest. Similarly, *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* depicts a floating crucifix and fragmented geometric forms; Christ's body hovers in a void above an energy vortex. Dalí juxtaposes science and religion, transforming the fragmentation of the material world into a metaphor for spiritual unity. As the saying goes: 'Green bamboos, all are the Dharma-body; Luxuriant yellow flowers, nothing but prajñā (wisdom)'. This 'harmony of contradictions' resonates with the Zen dialectic logic that perceives an eternally flowing true awareness within the cosmos.

3.3 Inner Intuition: Artistic Expression Beyond Rational Cognition

While geometric abstraction mapped spiritual territories on canvas, another group of artists believed true creation began when rationality ceased. The painter's task does not confront a blank surface, nor is it an act of copying external objects onto that surface. Rather, it is the selection and reconstruction of pre-existing visual data within the mind's eye.[9] Just as a Zen master might suddenly overturn a tea bowl, using shattered porcelain to awaken a disciple, modernists began to let art's sharpest edge reside in uncontrolled gestures, accidental drips, and the silence of ready-mades. This was no longer merely a visual revolution, but a cognitive one.

Action Painting and the 'No-Mind' (Wuxin) State. Jackson Pollock's Action Painting was an experiment in the collusion of body and consciousness. Its drip technique deeply resonates with the Zen state of 'no-mind' (wuxin), making the creative process itself a dynamic form of Zen practice. As expressed: 'Zen is the ultimate stillness within movement, and the ultimate movement within stillness; quiescent yet constantly illuminating, illuminating yet eternally quiescent; movement and stillness are non-dual, directly probing the origin of life'.[10] In his masterpiece *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, paint is poured onto canvas laid on the floor; lines intertwine

into a network, completely abandoning brushes and compositional pre-planning, thus elevating painting from 'hand-painting' to 'body-moving.' Gombrich argued that "(modern) artists and critics advocated this approach not only under the influence of Chinese art, but also, and indeed wholly, under the spell of Far Eastern mysticism—particularly the mysticism that gained currency in the West in the name of Zen Buddhism." [11]

The drip method visualizes the unconscious; Pollock controlled the trajectory of paint through the rhythmic movement of his body around the canvas. In *Lavender Mist*, arcs of silver-white, deep grey, and dark red lines intertwine randomly into a dense web. This 'unconscious' creative method involved relinquishing intellectual control, letting bodily instinct guide the action. Pollock admitted that while painting, he didn't know what he was doing; only afterwards did he understand what he had expressed. The shackles of rational thought were broken; the essence of art manifested in the state of 'no-mind.'

'Non-Action' (Wuwei) and the Readymade. Marcel Duchamp declared: 'If you wish, my art would be that of living: each second, each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral. It's a sort of constant euphoria.' [12] His Readymade practice was also a cross-cultural experiment concerning 'non-action' (wuwei). For instance, the subversion of *Fountain* lies not only in the urinal itself but in the act transforming an industrial object into an artistic signifier. Similarly, in *Bicycle Wheel*, he inverted a wheel fixed to a stool without any formal modification. This 'non-interventionist' creative view accords with the Zen practice logic of 'letting things follow their natural course' (renyun ziran), meaning letting go of attachment to form so that the thing reveals its own nature. This subversion declared 'everyone can be an artist,' simultaneously revealing that Zen truth is found nowhere else but in the ordinary mind present in drinking tea and eating rice. As the Zen poem states: 'Clouds in the azure sky, water in the bottle'. Duchamp's Readymades transformed the 'cloud-water debate' into an art historical kōan (paradoxical anecdote).

4 From Matter to Mind: The Modern Spiritual Enlightenment of Zen Aesthetics

In the postwar era, Zen crystallized into a potent spiritual force in America. Its influence expanded beyond the religious sphere into virtually all facets of American social life, profoundly permeating avant-garde artistic creation. Zen philosophy provided postwar artists and art theorists with both creative inspiration and intellectual grounding. During the 1950s and 60s, avant-garde artists like John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg became regular attendees at D.T. Suzuki's Zen lectures at Columbia University. They frequently gathered at New York's Artists Club to discuss Zen principles, actively assimilating these ideas into their artistic practices. A more fundamental shift in modern art was unfolding: art ceased wrestling with materiality and turned inward toward the depths of consciousness.

4.1 From Zen Aesthetics to the 'Dematerialization' of Modern Art

The encounter between Zen aesthetics and modern art was a profound dialogue centered on 'existence.' The core aim of both was to liberate art from the constraints of matter, allowing spirit to break free from formal shackles and communicate freely. 'Dematerialization' signifies a direct search for the essence of things. Works like Mondrian's grids, Rothko's color fields, and Giacometti's emaciated figures successfully stripped away material redundancy, leaving only spiritual frameworks. By simplifying material elements, they preserved the core spiritual expression. They do not rely on specific images; just as Zen kōans awaken people with simple actions or phrases, modern art uses minimal visual elements to shatter ingrained cognitive patterns.

The deeper significance of this modern art transformation lies in reconstructing the relationship between art and the viewer. Matter is refined to its extreme; the viewer is no longer a passive recipient but an active participant. Blank spaces on the canvas, color transitions, rhythmic lines—all require the viewer to fill in and interpret them using their own life experience. This coincides with the Zen way of enlightenment 'not relying on words, transmitting mind to mind' (*buli wenzi, yixin chuanxin*): true art gradually sheds its material shell to become a vital bridge for the exchange of mind and spirit between people.[13]

4.2 From Traditional Realism to Spirituality

Artistic expression is not merely replicating what the eye sees, but awakening deep emotional experiences within. While Western painting pursued 'verisimilitude' through chiaroscuro and anatomical precision, modernist painting and Zen directed creation toward the inner world. As Mr. Zhu Liangzhi argued, the highest realm Zen achieves is the realm of desolate coldness, which provides an atmosphere for the isolated void of the 'Zen state' .[14] A single withered leaf can evoke the desolation and bleakness of autumn mountains; a single ink trace can conjure the vastness of rivers and seas.

Modern art similarly implies this, manifesting as a shift from 'outward imitation' to 'inward gazing.' Traditional realism emphasized the precise representation of objective forms, while Cézanne depicted apples as geometric forms possessing a sense of eternity, and Kandinsky liberated color from the constraints of form. Their creations embodied a liberation of artistic form, freeing art from the external shell of realism; lines and color blocks were no longer wholly subservient to nature. Color field paintings make color burn on the canvas, not to depict real flames, but to ignite emotional resonance within the viewer; Mondrian used straight lines to divide space in an attempt to capture the rhythm of order itself.

The deep driving force behind this artistic turn stems from humanity's questioning of the concept of 'truth.' Artistic expression shifted from 'how to paint realistically' to 'how to paint truthfully.' After the technical heights of realism were reached, art gradually realized that the deepest truth resides in the spiritual realm, invisible to the naked eye. Modern art, through its expressive forms, provided channels for self-dialogue for the

viewer; it ceased to merely make people 'see' external scenes but enabled them to perceive the 'truth' within their own minds.

4.3 From Passive Viewing to Active Apprehension

The realization of art's value relies on the subjective participation of the viewer. The transformation of modern art continued this logic, transferring the initiative of meaning interpretation to the viewer. Artworks no longer provide definitive narratives or pictorial answers; instead, they construct open cognitive frameworks that prompt recipients to generate meaning through self-projection.

Traditional painting established an authoritative viewing order through perspective and narrative composition, fixing the viewer in a passive position. As Wang Guowei's theory of 'viewing things as things' (*yi wu guan wu*) indicates, this mode leads to a state of separation between subject and object: 'not knowing what is self and what is the other'. Modernism, by dissolving pictorial focus and representational reference, shattered this unidirectional reception. Abstract painting, stripped of recognizable imagery, makes color relationships, textural rhythms, and spatial structure the dominant elements. The viewer cannot rely on existing cognitive schemas to interpret the work and is forced to confront the intrinsic power of the formal language itself. This parallels the Zen insight contained in the *kōan*: 'It is not the wind that moves, nor the flag that moves; it is your mind that moves.'

5 Conclusion

The intrinsic connection between Zen aesthetics and modernist painting reveals the essential law of artistic evolution: the deepening of spiritual expression is achieved through the extreme simplification of form. This cross-cultural dialogue proves that the core value of aesthetics transcends regional or formal innovation. It also confirms that when the subtraction of form reaches its critical point, the addition of spirit is realized through the active interpretation of the viewer. This is not merely an innovation of aesthetic language but an eternal proposition of humanity understanding its relationship with the self and the world through art. The dialogue between Zen and Modernism is, in essence, a shared exploration of 'human liberation' by Eastern and Western civilizations. Within the global context, this cross-cultural resonance provides contemporary art with a path to transcend dualistic oppositions and return to spiritual origins, while also writing new possibilities for the exchange and symbiosis of human civilizations.

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